

## 202 The New Deal In History

For decades now, Americans have been thinking, talking, and writing about the New Deal. During the 1930's—the years of the New Deal—people's feelings were especially strong. Some Americans in those years thought that the New Deal was a radical threat to the American way of life. Others believed that the New Deal programs were moderate reforms necessary to help the nation recover from the depression.

Like other Americans, historians, too, have held strong opinions about the New Deal. In 1945 historian Henry Steele Commager reviewed the record of the New Deal and summed it up in a magazine article. In the following selection,

based on that article, Commager explained his reasons for forming a favorable conclusion about Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Now that the bitter quarrels over New Deal policies have been drowned out by the war [World War II], it is possible to evaluate those policies in some historical perspective. Those policies have been decisively voted for four times by large popular majorities. They have been turned into reality so fully that controversy about them is almost irrelevant. It should be possible to fix, with some degree of accuracy, the place occupied by Roosevelt in American history.

We can see now that the "Roosevelt revolution" was no revolution. Rather it was the high point of 50 years of historical development. Roosevelt himself, though clearly a leader, was an instrument of the people's will rather than a creator of, or a dictator to, that will. Indeed, the issue of the expansion of government control for democratic purposes began in the 1890's. A longer perspective will see the 50 years from the 1890's to the present as a historical unit. The roots of the New Deal go deep down into our past. It is not understandable except in terms of that past.

What was really only a new deal of the old cards looked, to startled and troubled Americans at the time, like a revolution for two reasons. It was carried through with breathless rapidity. And, in spirit at least, it contrasted sharply with what came immediately before it. But if the comparison had been made, not with the Coolidge-Hoover era, but with the Wilson, the Theodore Roosevelt, even the Bryan era, the contrasts would have been less striking than the similarities.

Actually, the precedents for the major part of the New Deal legislation were to be found in these earlier periods. Regulation of rail-

roads and of business dated back to the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Sherman Act of 1890. The farm relief program of the Populists and of Wilson anticipated much that the Roosevelt administration passed into law. The beginnings of conservation can be traced to the Carey Act of 1894 and the Reclamation

Power regulation began with the Water Power Act of 1920. Supervision over securities exchanges began with laws of the Harding and Coolidge administrations. Regulation of money is as old as the Union. The fight which Bryan and Wilson waged against the "money power" and Wall Street was more bitter than anything that came during the New Deal. Labor legislation had its beginnings in such states as Massachusetts and New York over 50 years ago. Much of the program of social security was worked out in Wisconsin and other states early in the 1900's.

There is nothing remarkable about this. Nor does it lessen in any way the significance of President Roosevelt's achievements and contributions. It is to the credit of Roosevelt that he worked within the framework of American history and tradition.

What, then, are the major achievements, the lasting contributions, of the first three Roosevelt administrations? First, perhaps, comes the restoration of self-confidence, the reassertion of faith in democracy. Those who lived through the electric spring of 1933 will remember the change from depression and discouragement to excitement and hope. Those able to compare the last decade with previous decades will agree that interest in public affairs has rarely been as widespread, as alert, or as responsive.

All this may seem indefinite. If we look to more definite things, what does the record show? Of primary importance has been the physical rebuilding of the country. It became clear, during the 1920's and 1930's, that the natural resources of the country—its soil, forests, water power—were being destroyed at a dangerous rate. The development of the Dust Bowl, and the migration of farmers to the Promised Land of California, the tragic floods on the Mississippi and the Ohio, dramatized to the American people the urgency of this problem.

Roosevelt tackled it with energy and boldness. The Civilian Conservation Corps enlisted

almost 3 million young men. They planted 17 million acres in new forests, built over 6 million small dams to stop soil erosion, and fought forest fires and plant and animal diseases. To check erosion, the government organized a cooperative program which obtained the help of over one fourth of the farmers of the country. More important than all this was the TVA, a gigantic laboratory for regional rebuilding.

Equally important has been the New Deal achievement in human rehabilitation. Roosevelt came into office at a time when unemployment had reached perhaps 14 million, and when private solutions had failed. It was perhaps inevitable that he should sponsor a broad program of government aid. More important than relief was the acceptance of the principle that the government was responsible for the welfare and security of its people.

That this principle was bitterly opposed now seems hard to believe. Its establishment must stand as one of the main achievements of the New Deal. Beginning with emergency legislation for relief, the Roosevelt program in the end included the whole field of social security—unemployment assistance, old-age pensions, aid to women and children, and public health. It involved programs of rural rehabilitation, the establishment of maximum hours and minimum wages, the prohibition of child labor, and reform in housing.

In the political field the achievements of the New Deal were equally notable. First we must note the steady trend toward the strengthening of government and the expansion of government activities—whether for good or bad only the future can tell. As yet no better method of dealing with the problems of a modern economy and society has shown itself. It can be said that though government today has, quantitatively, far greater responsibilities than it had a generation ago, it has, qualitatively, no greater power. For our constitutional system remains as it always was. All power still resides in the people and their representatives in Congress. They can at any moment take from their government any power.

We seem to have overcome our traditional distrust of the government and realized that a strong state could be used to benefit and advance the nation. That is by no means a New Deal achievement. But it is a development which has gained much from the experience of the American people during the Roosevelt administrations.

It has meant, of course, a marked federal centralization. Along with this has come a great increase in the power of the President. The charge that Roosevelt has been a dictator can be dismissed, along with charges that Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson were dictators. American politics simply doesn't run to dictators. But Roosevelt has been a "strong" executive—as every great democratic President has been a strong executive. There is little doubt that Roosevelt accepted this situation cheerfully.

The New Deal, as far as can be foreseen, is here to stay. There seems no chance of a reversal of any of the major developments in politics in the last twelve years. This was recognized by the Republicans in 1940 and again in 1944. Both platforms endorsed all the essentials of the New Deal.

And what, finally, of Roosevelt himself? It may seem too early to fix his position in our history. Yet that position is reasonably clear. He takes his place in the great tradition of American liberalism, along with Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Wilson. Coming to office at a time when the very foundations of the republic seemed threatened, he restored confidence and proved that democracy could act as effectively in crisis as could totalitarian governments.

A liberal, he put government clearly at the service of the people. A conservative, he pushed through reforms designed to strengthen the natural and human resources

of the nation, restore agriculture and business to their former prosperity, and save capitalism. He saw that problems of government were primarily political, not economic. He saw that politics should control the economy, not the other way around.

"The only sure defense of continuing liberty," Roosevelt said, "is a government strong enough to protect the interests of the people, and a people strong enough and well enough informed to maintain its sovereign control over its government." The Roosevelt administration proved once more that it was possible for such a government to exist and such a people to flourish, and restored to the United States its position as "the hope of the human race."

## READING REVIEW

1. According to Commager, what were the three major accomplishments of the New Deal?
2. Cite two pieces of evidence which Commager used to support his conclusion that the New Deal "is here to stay."
3. Why did Commager reach a favorable conclusion about President Roosevelt and his New Deal policies?